

Foreword

Message from Professor Njabulo S. Ndebele, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Cape Town

It is a privilege to welcome readers to the 2006 edition of the *South African Child Gauge*. This much-needed publication provides an annual update on progress towards realising children's rights in South Africa. The theme of this edition is children and poverty, and I congratulate the Children's Institute for addressing such an important barrier to children's rights and well-being.

Poverty remains one of South Africa's greatest challenges – mainly because it is inherited. Today, the majority of South Africa's children are living in households too poor to buy basic necessities. Unless the cycle is broken, generation after generation will continue to struggle without much hope of sharing in what this country has to offer. This is contradictory to the values enshrined in our Constitution. In this second decade of democracy, combating poverty needs to be a priority of government, business, civil society, and indeed every individual.

In South Africa, most children live in under-developed rural areas where there is a lack of access to services, infrastructure and opportunities. In this regard, poverty needs to be understood as multi-dimensional, and encompassing not only a lack of money or material resources, but also various other deprivations such as access to schooling, health care and a conducive living environment.

Poverty impacts on children's rights in a variety of ways. For South Africa's children, poverty means growing up without sufficient and nutritious food, which impacts on health, growth and development. It means that many children live in inadequate or overcrowded housing. It means a lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation for nearly half of the country's children, which also causes health problems. A lack of access to electricity adds further to health and safety hazards, as many families have to use paraffin or coal fires for cooking and heating. In addition, poverty for many of South Africa's children means a long walk to reach school – often on an empty stomach.

These experiences of poverty are compounded by the HIV/AIDS pandemic which adversely affects families' resources in many different ways. The agency and resilience of the millions



of children and their caregivers who live in poverty in this time of HIV/AIDS is remarkable. There are many who triumph daily against extreme conditions and who are creative and purposeful in finding ways to survive and to celebrate family life. Indeed, in implementing a national response to this situation, the importance of strengthening and supporting families as the optimum place for children to grow and develop must not be lost.

Today, our children are growing up within a progressive rights framework based on the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the South African Constitution. While recognising that much progress has been made by the government in the past decade, there are still many challenges to tackle to ensure that all children's rights are realised. With the *South African Child Gauge*, the Children's Institute plays a key role in monitoring the realisation of children's rights and informing the prioritisation of children's well-being by government decision-makers and civil society role-players.

The essays on children and poverty in this publication reflect on various measures that are crucial to the task of making children's rights real. Among these are three that need to be emphasised.

First: a national information system that can provide reliable and timely child-centred data, which is crucial to planning, is an imperative. Second: inter-sectoral collaboration between all government departments that impact on child well-being is required to ensure integrated development and service delivery. And third: applying the principle of the 'best interest of the child' in all decisions that affect children's lives.

The realisation of children's rights is not only up to the government and dedicated role-players – whether as individuals or as players in our various sectors, we can all work toward putting the best interests of children first. The *South African Child Gauge* is a good place to begin planning our interventions, however big or small, to allow our children to share in the wealth of this country, and to get the rights they are entitled to.